

The Great Seal of the United States: Past, Present and Future

Thank you so much for having me here this afternoon. I want especially to thank Bruce, who agreed to host the U.S. Diplomacy Center exhibition on the Great Seal and Stanley Mervis, trustee of the Gilroy Roberts Foundation, whose generosity made it possible. And if he were here, I would thank Charles Thomson, whose home in this beautiful setting brings us all together.

The Man Behind It All—Charles Thomson

I have to admit, to me, Charles Thomson is an enigma. He gave our country one of its most powerful symbols, our Great Seal, but he is virtually unknown except to a small circle of historians and diplomats. More people know the popular culture fallacy that Benjamin Franklin proposed the turkey to Congress as our national emblem instead of the eagle (he actually just made a joking reference to the turkey in a letter to his daughter) but no popular stories surround Thomson's choice of the eagle. Despite the fine work you do here, it is difficult, as we all know, to push against the inertia of buried memories.

Charles Thomson in his Time

Born in 1729, he came to the U.S. at ten years old, and orphaned when his surviving parent, his father, died on the voyage from Ireland. Through his intelligence and perserverence he received an education in the classics, taught school, negotiated a treaty for Native Americans, was adopted into the Delaware tribe as the "man who told the truth," and, later, took up his new country's battle for freedom with great zeal. Americans love rags to riches stories, self-made men stories, but more people know the name Horatio Alger than the lucky few who know about the inspiring life of Charles Thomson.

Charles Thomson Takes On Designing the Seal

If we think about Thomson's contribution to the symbols of our nation, we need to scroll back a few years, actually about 227 years, when our country was battling the British in 1782, and it looked as if we might, just might win this war of independence. The members of the Continental Congress still needed a coat of arms, or an identity, a seal, for our country. What exactly was the status of creating our seal at that date?

At the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the last resolution stated, "That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America." Thus, the concept of the seal and the birth of our nation are inextricably entwined.

Six years later, 1782, and no seal yet existed, although three committees and 13 men toiled over this difficult task. On June 13, 1782, the Congress finally charged Charles Thomson, as the 14th man now 52, with designing the seal. Why Thomson? He certainly was not an artist and had little interest or knowledge of heraldry, the study of coats of arms.

Over the years, however, he had proven his constancy, honesty and involvement in everything to do with the Congress, from serving as its secretary year after year, including keeping "special" minutes of "secret" affairs, to being an archivist and tending to matters of diplomacy. Some have even referred to him as the Prime Minister at that time. He might have seemed provincial to some, but he was highly intelligent, morally irreproachable and intellectually curious. Most important of all, he had a reputation for "getting things done."

He set to work immediately upon his assignment. Like any good researcher, he gathered the previous works around him. Can we picture his lanky frame bending over these

sketches, reports and heraldic designs (called blazons), contemplating what the others had proposed over the past six years?

Can we imagine how he must have felt looking at the first design from that illustrious 1776 committee—Franklin, Jefferson and Adams? A design that the Continental Congress had tactfully tabled even though the committee had such venerable members? The artist who worked for these three founding fathers was Pierre du Simitière, a fascinating man in his own right. Swiss-born, his seal emphasized the unity of peoples who joined him from many other countries in his adopted homeland. Du Simitière drew a shield and a scroll with the words E PLURIBUS UNUM on it that eventually appeared on the front of Thomson's design. Du Simitière also sketched the triangular eye of Providence and the Roman numerals 1776 which showed up on the reverse of Thomson's seal. Du Simitière himself did not create a design for a reverse side of the seal. Instead, the committee favored a concept by Franklin depicting Moses parting the Red Sea while fleeing the Pharaoh.

Francis Hopkinson, artist for the second committee to develop a seal used the colors red, white and blue, the same ones he chose for the American flag, and rendered the bundle of arrows, the olive branch and the radiant constellation of 13 stars in his drawing. Hopkinson had also illustrated a \$50 bill in 1778 with an unfinished pyramid, which may have inspired the appearance of the same image later. As Thompson pondered Hopkinson's drawing, Thomson actually scratched an unfinished shield in the lower margin, perhaps attempting to adapt some of Hopkinson's elements to his liking.

For the third committee in 1782, artist William Barton, who eventually collaborated with Thomson, drew a small eagle with outstretched wings (called "displayed") for the front and an

unfinished pyramid on the back. With a few small changes, Thomson essentially used Barton's design for the reverse.

But what if, along with his colleagues' renderings, Charles Thomson also turned to something called an emblem book? Emblem books were collections of illustrations with associated text, extremely popular among the educated from the late 16th century in Europe.

Americans read them as well. We know that Benjamin Franklin owned an important emblem book by a German called Joachim Camerarius, first printed in 1597. We know that Thomson worked with Franklin on American currency designs that came from this book and that Thomson's eagle bears a striking resemblance to the eagle in that book with its wings outstretched, head facing an olive branch to its right and a bundle of arrows to its left. And we cannot forget his connection with the Delaware.

Maybe the National Treasures folks in Hollywood will spin a yarn about the creation of the seal based on a secret encoded emblem book, but outside of Hollywood I like to think that Thomson drew from many sources to come up with a final drawing that William Barton so artistically rearranged and refined.

The Symbols of the Seal

The Continental Congress leaped at the eagle and the shield design, accepting Thomson's report the very same day he submitted it. Perhaps most important in Thomson's submission are the "Remarks and Explanations" written in his hand. I will mostly paraphrase his language, since it incorporates many heraldic terms that we do not commonly use.

Thomson stated that the red and white stripes represent all the states "all joined in one solid compact" united by a blue bar representing Congress. The motto, "E PLURIBUS UNUM"

alludes to this union. The states draw strength from Congress and Congress depends on the preservation of that union to preserve its integrity.

The colors are the same as in the flag of the United States: white signifies purity and innocence; red, hardiness and valor and blue, the color of Congress, signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice.

The olive branch and arrows denote the power of peace and war, exclusively vested in Congress. The eagle always faces the olive branch to emphasize our nation's affinity for peace, but holds the arrows to communicate that we will defend ourselves when we have to. The constellation denotes a new state taking its place among the other sovereign powers. The shield appears on the front the eagle's breast without any support to denote that the U.S. has to be independent and rely on its own virtue, not on other nations.

On the reverse, the Pyramid signifies Strength and Duration. It is unfinished, because the work of a democracy is never done; we are always building our nation. The eye over it and the motto, "ANNUIT CŒPTIS" allude to the "many signal interpositions of providence" in favor of the American cause. The date at its base is that of the Declaration of Independence and the words under it, NOVUS ORDO SÆCULORUM, signify the beginning of the new American year, which commences from that date.

Although the Continental Congress accepted designs for the front, or obverse, and back, or reverse, of the seal, the back has never been cut into a die that impresses documents. Some people in this country feel that is a grave oversight, but there is a good reason for it.

The back was meant for a hanging, or pendant, seal, that has both a front and a back like a coin. If a seal is impressed on paper, it is one sided, and only the front appears. The

young U.S. government did not cut a die for the back of its pendant seals because making two impressions on one cake of wax is difficult and expensive. Also, once made, the double sided seal is extremely fragile and easily damaged. The U.S. never used the seal this way, even though this was the usage for which the reverse was planned.

Today, our seal appears on the back of our dollar bill, thanks to officials in the government of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The once forgotten reverse shows up when we buy a latte at Starbucks or pay a toll on the turnpike. The era of the pendant seal ended in 1871, but the icons on the reverse of our seal stay with us as long as we have money in our wallet.

We may think the symbolism on our seal is pretty wonderful, exemplifying the unity, strength and independence of our nation, but there are people that attribute much more controversial interpretations to the seal.

Masons, Illuminati and Things that Go Bump on the Internet

Some may ask, aren't these all Masonic symbols? The first National Treasure movie erroneously promulgates that theory.

The short answer is no. To our knowledge, besides Benjamin Franklin, no Masons were on the committees or among the artists who worked on the seal. None of Benjamin's Franklin's suggestions appeared in the final rendering, especially his motto: REBELLION TO TYRANTS IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD. But, you say, "I've seen that eye and pyramid associated with the Masons."

It is important to remember that the Masons drew from the same pool of images as did Charles Thomson and our other founding fathers. The creators of the seal had classical

educations, and for this reason admired the ancient pyramids of Egypt. Literate individuals drew inspiration from illustrations in emblem books, other forms of art, architecture, magazines, newspapers, currency, heraldry and seals of families, cities and countries abroad.

Before Congress accepted the U.S. seal, the Masons seldom used the eye and pyramid symbolism, but once influenced by the seal, incorporated the eye and pyramid into their use. Pyramids also appeared in emblem books.

If not Masons, can't the seal refer to dark forces like the Illuminati, so exploited today by Dan Brown in his novels *Angels and Demons* and the *Da Vinci Code*? Could the "new order of the ages" underneath the pyramid refer to the takeover of our country by a conspiracy of dark forces? Could a statement on the internet that the Roman numeral 1776 on the pyramid's base refers to the year the Illuminati came into being? To this I would reply, "Did this person never hear of the Declaration of Independence?"

Here is a reply to the conspiracy theorists. Our nation is 233 years old this July. The men who founded it relied on hope, dedication, intelligence and hard work. They believed their experiment would work, but they could not *know* it would work. Everything they created for the nation, whether it was a flag, Constitution or a seal, contained words and symbols that strengthened the ideals they upheld, not only for the early years but also for the future. What good was all their effort if the country only lasted a couple of decades?

Today the symbolism of the seal—standing for independence, unity and strength—is as meaningful as ever. The intent of the Founding Fathers has been realized and exceeded. As our country has grown in complexity and population, the Seal has remained steadfast, unlike the seals of other countries that change appearance with rulers or regimes.

The symbolism of the seal can be interpreted negatively, because basic symbols embody multiple interpretations, but we can only look to the words of our Founding Fathers to see a positive intent. While there is ample written historical documentation of this intent in the seal's creation, there is not one shred of *credible* evidence that links our national symbol with dark forces. The real miracle is not finding hoards of treasure or unearthing some deep dark secret, the real miracle is that these men, without any blueprints before them, founded a nation that has endured and continues to endure.

To exemplify the enduring message of the seal in our exhibition, we incorporated children's interpretations of the seal's meaning through their drawings. Although we only had room for four drawings, what impressed us in making a choice for the exhibit, was that the drawings we received showed us that these students really understood why the seal is so special. One of our winners, a recent immigrant from Korea, illustrated the same kind of unity of nations in one country that Du Simitière did in the very first sketch proposed.

The Seal in Use after Its Creation

In 1782, Thomson impressed the first document with the seal, authorizing General George Washington to negotiate better treatment for prisoners of war with the British (an interesting side note considering the debates about torture going on today). For the next seven years, Thomson served as keeper of the seal, which was affixed to treaties, diplomatic correspondence and other official papers.

In 1789, with the Constitution ratified, Thomson sought to obtain a post in the new government as an archivist and keeper of the seal. But as with many major institutional changes, some of the old employees are cast aside, and Thomson relinquished the seal into

President George Washington's hands, quite literally, before he left government service, never to return.

That same year, Congress changed the name of the United State's Department of Foreign Affairs to the Department of State, and added responsibilities to the renamed agency. One of these new responsibilities was to take charge of the Great Seal of the United States. To this day, each official document authorized by the seal bears two signatures, that of the President of the United States and that of the Secretary of State (or designate). The Secretary is the witness for the President's signature.

The Seal Today

The use of the seal changed over the years as our government expanded. I will only refer to one important and very dramatic event. A great crisis for the seal occurred in 1814 during the War of 1812 when the British burned Washington, DC. Secretary of State James Monroe saw British troops massing toward the capital and instructed three clerks, including Stephen Pleasonton who was in charge of the Great Seal, to remove the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and other papers documenting our nation's founding from Washington, DC.

They escaped the great fire, and somehow, so did the seal. Perhaps Pleasonton hid it away; perhaps he removed it, but whatever his action, President Madison was able to use the seal immediately after the fire on a proclamation rallying the American people to the defense of their land.

Today the seal resides in a glass case inside the Department of State Exhibit Hall. The Chief of the Presidential Appointments office manages the use of the seal, which impresses as

many as 3,000 documents a year. These include Presidential commissions such as for Supreme Court judges, Cabinet members, special commission members, Foreign Service Officers and ambassadors. Other documents include treaty ratifications, which the Senate must approve, and diplomatic envelopes bearing letters of credentials that ambassadors and other envoys present to heads of state, as well as letters of recall, that bring ambassadors back home.

There is more about the seal on our website, <http://diplomacy.state.gov> and also an excellent web site www.greatseal.com . With advance notice, groups of four or five or more can schedule a time with me to view seal in operation.

There's much more in the exhibition. If there's time, I can answer questions now, and will be on hand at the exhibit. Thank you once again for sharing this time with me.